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Undercover investigators smuggled decoy explosives through O'Hare International Airport at alarming rates six years after the Sept. 11 attacks, leading to calls Thursday for better training of security screeners, higher job-performance standards and harsh consequences for failure.

The criticism came as a new government report heightened concerns about the security of the 2 million airline passengers who travel each day in the U.S.

It found that screeners at O'Hare's passenger security checkpoints failed to detect 60 percent of simulated explosives that were hidden in carry-on bags or in the clothing of agents working for the U.S. Transportation Security Administration.

The poor performance prompted a Chicago-area congressman, Mark Kirk, to seek a high-level meeting with U.S. Department of Homeland Security officials to see what can be done immediately to shore up checkpoint security at the airport.

The failure rate was even worse—about 75 percent—among TSA screeners at Los Angeles International Airport, according to the classified report, which was obtained by USA Today.

The detection rate was much better at San Francisco International Airport, where a private security firm that screens airline passengers for the TSA found 80 percent of the phony bombs that agents tried to bring onto airplanes, according to the newspaper account of the report, which the security agency confirmed as being accurate.

Such improvised explosive devices, creatively camouflaged inside an almost endless array of objects that include electronics, children's toys and personal grooming items, are considered the No. 1 threat to aviation safety, said Ann Davis, a spokeswoman for the federal security agency, which Congress created after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Cockpit doors on planes have been hardened, and more federal air marshals are on flights in the aftermath of the attacks. But airport checkpoints remain a weak link in the security chain, according to experts.

The continued security woes are due to the high volume of people passing through the checkpoints, opposition based on privacy concerns to the government developing more detailed intelligence reports about passengers who might pose a high-risk threat, and the slow pace in deploying costly new screening technologies to replace 1950s-era X-ray machines, the experts said.

"We need to be catching [dangerous] people long before they arrive at the airport," said Justin Oberman, who formerly was a TSA assistant administrator for transportation threat assessment. "Increased law enforcement and intelligence are the single biggest things we can do to improve aviation security."

TSA officials said Thursday that the high failure rate among screeners is a misleading indicator and that airport security is better than ever.

"Our testing of screeners has become increasingly sophisticated to represent the threat posed by terrorists," Davis said. "The tests are designed to detect vulnerabilities, not to achieve a 100 percent pass rate among our security officers."

The success rate among screeners during the undercover tests has improved about 20 percent since the TSA began examining its work force on an unannounced basis in 2002, according to congressional sources. Screeners in those earlier covert tests failed to find about 25 percent of knives, guns and phony bombs that agents attempted to bring through security checkpoints.

Today's testing is much tougher, often involving bomb components the size of a pen cap, the TSA's administrator testified at a congressional hearing this week.

Still, members of Congress and aviation-security experts were quick to assail the results as the latest evidence that huge holes remain in airport security.

"The TSA is saying that they gave the screeners a difficult test? Well, Al Qaeda isn't going to make it easy," said U.S. Rep. Kirk (R-Ill.).

Kirk asked the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees the TSA, to convene a summit at O'Hare to address the security lapses at the airport.

He wants the participants to include Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, TSA Administrator Kip Hawley, O'Hare's federal security director and Chicago airport officials.

"When a team of screeners is flunking, the leadership must be replaced," Kirk said.

He said screeners who are failing to do the job must be retrained and held to higher standards.

The TSA report noted that the high volume of passengers who pass through O'Hare adds to the complexity of the screening process, which devotes less than 30 seconds to each traveler and their carry-on luggage. Another factor cited was that the physical layout of the checkpoint lanes makes it difficult for TSA supervisors to observe screener performance, the report said.

The report did not mention the chronic problem of high turnover in the screener ranks, but it remains a serious issue in training and retaining qualified personnel, experts said.

From June to September of this year, the attrition rate was 14 percent among the approximately 1,155 full-time screeners at O'Hare and 56 percent for approximately 450 part-time screeners, Davis said.